Moral Injury: What Leaders Need To Know

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What Do These Stories Have In Common?

- A Marine Cpl orders his team to open fire on a vehicle refusing to stop at a checkpoint, even though he can see it is filled with women and children
- A Navy corpsman fails to save the life of his platoon commander after he was shot in the upper chest, but believes he could have succeeded if he had had better training
- A PO1 on a frigate fails to be at his wife's side as she dies from breast cancer because his CO said he was needed aboard ship during its underway period
- A Marine squad in Afghanistan makes a pact to get brutal revenge on the Taliban fighters responsible for the cruel death of one of their own unit members
- A Navy or Marine Corps leader promises to bring back the husband of a young bride and the father of her infant child, but because of unexpected events, fails to do so

A New Idea With a Long History

Moral Injury:

Damage to individuals' conceptions of themselves, other people, important institutions, or the Divine resulting from betrayal of deeply held values and beliefs, either by the individuals, themselves, or by others they trust.

This is just one possible, approximate definition

Related Concepts

Moral courage vs. moral failure

Ethical decision-making vs. ethical violations

Honor vs. dishonor

Faithfulness vs. betrayal

Purity vs. defilement (miasma, pollution)

Killer vs. murderer

Pride vs. shame

Forgivable vs. unforgivable

How Does Moral Injury Differ From Other Types of Stress Injury?

	Moral Injury	Life Threat Injury	Loss Injury	Wear & Tear Injury
Caused by:	•Violation of values •Betrayal of trust	•Close brush with death or its aftermath	•Separation from cherished people or things	•Too much stress •Not enough rest, recovery
What is damaged:	•Meaning •Moral compass •Identity •Trust in others	•Loss of illusion of immortality •Safety	•Sustaining attachments •Life routines •Openness to others	•Depletion of biological and psychological resources
What Is needed	•Forgiveness •Understandin	•Safety •Getting	•Grieving •Relearning	•Restoring

Leaders' Unique Role in Moral Injury

- Strengthen:
  - Moral courage & moral fiber
- Mitigate
  - Enforce core values
  - Own up to mistakes
- Identify:
  - Fractured moral compasses
  - Excessive blame or shame
- Treat
  - Restore meaning
  - Make amends
  - Promote forgiveness
- Reintegrate
  - Opportunities for redemption